

## **Why we should stop measuring performance *and* well-being**

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As Organizational Behavior scholars (or anyone active in work psychology, HRM, or management), we are trained and socialized to take into account two possible outcomes in our research: performance and well-being. This is notable not only in our theoretical models, our reviews and meta-analyses, our choice of variables when collecting data, but also more implicitly in our thinking, personal and professional ideologies, and the ways we reason about our field of research and how we justify and argue our theories as analysts of human behavior in the workplace. On the one hand, it has been argued that the sole purpose of Organizational Behavior (and I use this term loosely, as it easily translates to related disciplines like the ones mentioned above) is to enhance performance of organizations. This is not merely a marginalized perspective but appears in our mainstream and most prestigious journals, such as *Journal of Applied Psychology* (Dalal, 2005). On the other hand, it is widely acknowledged that our focus on organizational performance is insufficient and that it is also worthwhile to look at well-being of people, and in particular employees while researching workplace behaviors (see e.g., the review from Karina van de Voorde et al., 2012). This dichotomy of performance and well-being has served us quite well, and provided a space to differentiate ourselves from each other in our research purposes, thereby even pretending that we can take a ‘critical’ perspective on our field. So, first we have the hardcore OB-scholars, often if not almost always men, who primarily care about performance, and link individual performance to organizational performance. While doing this, they have the ultimate argument pro performance, because if an organization underperforms, and does not make any profits, the organization will go bankrupt, and people will lose their jobs. Hence, it *is* important to focus on performance, because it is the glue that will hold everything together, and ultimately our capitalist system depends on it.

Then we have the scholars who reject this view and postulate that this obsession with performance should be rejected, as it is detrimental for well-being of people, of employees, of anyone along the supply chain, and instead we should focus on the well-being of people. Well-being is such a nice term, because nobody can be against it, and it is universally applicable; almost everyone will be in agreement that well-being is important and that we all strive toward well-being. The enlightened positive psychologist goes even one step further and claims that we should be focusing on *happiness*. We should follow our dreams and passions, so that we

can be happy. And happiness can be found at work. We should spread this gospel around the world, and tell anyone that work can be a source of great happiness. Perhaps the underage child working in a tin mine to produce smartphones that we can use to share 10 top tips for mindfulness at work, may even believe one day that happiness at work truly exists. But finally, there is also the pragmatists, and perhaps many of us belong to this category. Pragmatists believe that organizations can achieve *both* high performance and well-being, and that given certain choices and contexts, this is the possibility that we should strive towards as scholars. We may engage in research and consultancy where we help organizations to achieve both: we realize this utopia where organizations function well, where people are highly performing, where organizations are well performing, and where employees are feeling well, healthy, happy and vigorous.

So what is the problem? The first and most fundamental problem is the lack of critical engagement with the concepts which are so incredibly central in our work. We cannot escape one meta-analysis in our field that does not test the relationships between a predictor on the one hand, and performance and/or well-being as outcomes on the other hand. We hardly ever discuss at a fundamental level what it is that we are actually theorizing and measuring, and what the effects are of our blind focus on performance and well-being. But secondly, I argue that there are fundamental problems not only with performance, but also with well-being as outcomes of interest. One could even argue that our inclusion of well-being legitimizes a performance-paradigm, as it allows us to always counteract any critique on performance by postulating that there is a lot of research on well-being out there. This is what happened when I worked with Edina Dóci on a critique on neoliberalism in organizational psychology: when we argued that neoliberal ideology has widely infiltrated OB-discourses, a reviewer countered us by stating that there is actually a lot of research in our field on ‘non-neoliberal’ ideology, such as well-being. Hence, a critique of performance in our field cannot be conducted without taking well-being as a concept into account, and perhaps while a critique on performance may be more obvious, a critique on well-being is even more highly needed, thereby describing what is currently going wrong in our field(-s).

This following piece will therefore explain why we should stop measuring performance *and* well-being. I will also present some alternatives, because we need to know what to do if we suddenly do not have to worry about how to measure performance and well-being in our research anymore. But before moving on, I wish to emphasize that I am *not* against performance or well-being as such. This piece is a performance on my behalf. We need to perform if we want to achieve something in life. I am also conscious of my own well-being,

and therefore sometimes I do not work but ride my bicycle, I tend not to work in the evening or weekends, and enjoy time with family and friends. I argue that performance and well-being are important, but we are currently obsessed with it, and therefore we have developed a tunnel vision (i.e., performance and well-being are the only outcomes that matter at work), and we have stopped to be critical of our own concepts.

### **Welcome to Production Society**

Much of what is currently happening in the workplace, our capitalist economies, and in the world has been more or less predicted by Karl Marx. However, most OB-scholars have not read him, and thus we do not see a problem with performance or productivity. We do not see a problem in the fact that now the only thing that matters is production. We live in production society, where everyone in the workplace has to be a creative producer of something innovative, something new that can be sold on the market, consumed by anonymous people. While for decades we have been aware of consumer society, the term consumer has a bad reputation nowadays, and in our current neoliberal capitalist society, man can differentiate himself by becoming a producer, to be a capitalist oneself and thus to be able to own the means of production (i.e., oneself) and this is exactly what we teach our students as well. Under the banner of critical thinking, we demand our students to produce at an enormous pace, continuously and efficient, from assignments to presentations and from exams to dissertations, and we train our students exactly what they can expect in the ‘real world’, what it is to be a producer. It is not so relevant what is being produced as such, but the primary aim is that performance and productivity are high. We have been all too happy incorporating this into our own research as well; any model in our field, whether it is an HR-system, mindfulness, job crafting, bullying, or psychological contract, aims to explain some variance in performance. The holy grail of HRM as a discipline is to ‘explain’ organizational performance. Individual performance is important for us OB-scholars, and our assumption is that it will lead to organizational performance, and in extension, that individual and team performance equals organizational performance.

We continue with measuring performance as the ultimate outcome of our research, while it has been shown over and over again that it is this obsession with performance that has been responsible for a wide range of societal problems. While performance for a (private) organization equals profitability, shareholder value, viability of the firm, and profit maximization, it instrumentalizes anything for the pursuit of these goals. This is inherent to capitalism, and was described by Marx in detail. Capitalism can only exist by eternal economic

growth which makes anything in the world instrumental to it. We have sacrificed our planet, nature, our tropical forests, our natural resources (the term itself!), animals, people, the environment, the climate, our lives, our private spaces (Airbnb, Uber), our friendships, love lives and social networks (Facebook, Instagram) for the pursuit of profit and thus organizational performance, and we still claim nothing is inherently wrong with our focus on performance! We enforce our global neo-colonial system where in the Global South millions of people live in poverty and where children have to work in the most horrific circumstances because profit needs to be generated. We have known this all too well, and for anyone who is new to this, read Steinbeck's 'Grapes of Wrath' (from 1939). So why is performance then so problematic that it leads to global exploitation of our planet, people and animals? I would argue that there are some fundamental problems with performance that explain this.

### *Some Problems with Performance*

The largest problem is that performance in itself does not have any intrinsic meaning. Performance is purely utilitarian: it is instrumental and can be used in any context to denote behavior as a 'performance' without any judgment of its content. When we measure performance we usually refer to it as doing what is told in your task description, and we do not have an evaluation of whether doing this is actually the right thing to do. When Richard Sennett (2008) talks about craftsmanship (or better craftswomanship), he talks about producing *with* meaning, and that meaning is not self-evident; it has to be theorized, explicitly included in how we perceive, theorize, and measure performance. Without this, performance is merely instrumental to profitability and thereby legitimizing abuse of it for the sake of exploitation. We simply *cannot* measure in-role performance of bank employees and perceive it as something inherently good, something to strive for, when we at the same time know that their performance may be composed of facilitating offshoring profits to tax havens, money laundering, and toxic financial products like CDOs and CDSs. These have no intrinsic human value, and these examples do not even have economic value for society, but we still do not question them. Instead, OB-scholars are all too happy when this is supervisor-rated or 'objectively' assessed, as if this way performance obtains its intrinsic meaning by dissociating it from the employee's own perception, thus pretending that performance rated by a supervisor has suddenly a mythical intrinsic property.

In extension, it has been often neglected that a myopic focus on performance in our work and in organizations has a range of perverse effects. It does not only contribute and legitimize exploitation around the world as discussed above, it also may lead to abuse and

competition within the workplace. When performance is all that matters, anything is permitted, as the question pertains not to *how* (i.e., at what costs) performance is achieved (for an organization, management, or society), but merely *how high* the performance is. It is not a coincidence that the HR-literature talks about *high-performance work systems*, as this term already denotes that performance is all that matters, and that the whole system is adapted to make people perform and that we should celebrate *high-performers*. In reaching high performance, little is asked about the externalities of this focus on performance itself. When people prioritize performance above anything, they may abuse subordinates, bully others, as performance is the only outcome that matters, both for organizations and for us scholars. Performance as we see, conceptualize and operationalize it is by definition competitive and not collaborative. We have to outperform others, be it other individuals, teams, or organizations. Our way of conceptualizing performance does not promote collaboration but is always aimed at competing with each other, to be the best, to be better than others, to sell more, to be a winner. It is no wonder we like sports so much and use it increasingly as an analogy for business, as it is sports where all is about winning. Forget the Olympic rhetoric about ‘participating is more important than winning’: it is the best who get the medals, not the losers. Hence, no surprise why we fail time and again to solve world problems like poverty and climate change; it would require us to collaborate and we merely obsess with competitive performance (as object of our research *and* in our own work as academics; Bal & Dóci, 2018).

Hence, performance occurs at the expense of others, of the planet and our well-being, and it remains a mystery why we retain to our performance fetish. But while an HR-scholar may be interested in organizational performance following the assumption that HRM serves organizational interests, why does a work psychologist obsess with performance? Performance may be good for organizations, but why would it be good for people? Who has ever explained why performance is good for an individual? When performance is detrimental for well-being, occurs at the expense of others, why would we continue to engage in it? Performance prioritizes the extrinsic nature of human life, and has its attractive appeal for people. Performance is the path to success, status, income, wealth, a partner, a career. All is made dependent upon how well people are performing. Hence, we need to produce, not just to differentiate ourselves from being a passive consumer and to reiterate our identity, but to basically have a life. It is not strange to see domestic duties, child rearing, caring for parents, are now increasingly being called ‘performance’ (see Lazarova et al., 2010), so that it enables us to be productive not only at work but also at home. We perform, hence we exist. Privileged families now ‘produce’ three

children, showing they can successfully manage a large family. So where is the intrinsic meaning of work? When does performance have any true meaning?

Looking at how we measure performance in our work, it does not directly show an intrinsic meaning of performance. First, the overarching analysis of performance at work is cross-sectional, and thus, comparative. We measure performance of a range of individuals at work (or teams or organizations), and then compare their levels of performance, and relate it to whatever predictor. Performance here is by definition comparative: we look at the high-performers, and determine what makes them ‘better’ than others. What is it that makes an employee outperforming others? Is it personality? HR-policies? Transformational leadership? While we hardly investigate intra-individual change in performance, where the comparison is within the person (over time), the ways we measure performance accentuates the above mentioned criticisms of our belief in a competitive workplace. Moreover, we do not merely study the workplace as it is, but we feed back our findings to society, we publish our work, we engage in consultancy and we write blogs about our research where we show how performance can be enhanced, thereby contributing to the underlying ideology of the competitive workplace.

But it goes further. We are also happy to support authoritarian views of workplaces. Let’s take a look at the most well-known (individual) performance measure of Williams and Anderson (1991; more than 5700 cited at Google Scholar). A couple of items to measure in-role performance are: “Adequately completes assigned duties” and “performs tasks that are expected of him/her”. We have used this scale thousands of times in our research and what do we ask people with these questions? We ask them for compliance but we do not ask them whether their work adds to greater dignity of themselves and others, whether their work has a positive contribution to other people, organizations, and the planet. We do not ask them to reflect on the intrinsic meaning of their work, we do not ask them to critically assess whether their work leads to meaning for themselves or others, we do not ask whether their work harms other people, animals or the planet. We merely ask whether they do what their organization tells them to do. They have to be soldiers, in our view, loyal soldiers, who will never question anything that their organization demands them to do. It does not matter whether their performance contributes to anything that would matter for society, but merely whether it fulfills organizational goals. We ask our students to engage in critical thinking, but we expect our respondents to be fulfilling organizational orders without complaining. We project a view upon them of having to be uncritical and loyal soldiers, who do not critique or resist against duties or expectations that are imposed upon them top-down. It is not strange to see how our journals are increasingly filled with research from authoritarian countries, as it is there where we see

our OB-utopia realized in the uncritical, perfectly performing employee serving the organization. People do not have to think anymore, it is the organization doing it for them, and in extension, the state.

Yes, one might be tempted to say, but what about all these new forms of performance, such as creative performance, proactive behavior, OCBs, job crafting and so on and so on? These performance-indicators explicitly move beyond the dictated, top-down nature of performance as conceptualized in the majority of our research. Yet, it does not make them less harmful in its internalized ideological nature. On the one hand, they represent a creative way to broaden the terminology of performance-related concepts which inherently capture an instrumental denotation as they consistently underdefine the potential benefits for individuals vis-à-vis the much more explicit organizational benefit (see e.g., my discussion on proactivity as doing extra work without being paid for it; Bal, 2017, C5). On the other hand, they have given rise to the very problems our obsession with performance has created: it was not merely because bankers were high on in-role performance that they were enabled to create all these ‘financial innovations’, including CDOs and CDSs, that directly led to the 2007 housing crisis, but because they were pushed to be ‘creative’, ‘proactive’ and so on, testing the boundaries of what is legally possible, thereby having crossed the ethical boundaries miles ago. It could be argued that these new types of performance are even worse than in-role performance, because as they seem so inherently desirable, we do not have to engage in any justification of why they would be good for individuals (see the literature on proactivity and job crafting) – it is just assumed that it is good for people because it is good for people. As academics, we probably know how these concepts can easily be perverted – and we all know those university managers who force us to engage in mindless tasks and unrewarded activities under the label of ‘citizenship’. It is through the managerial use of such terminology that concepts are hollowed out from the inside – becoming meaningless in its use as imposed upon individuals. So, in sum, there are various problems with performance, and performance-related concepts. A mainstream scholar could, however, offer two potential counterarguments.

First, one could argue that I am deliberately exaggerating and that performance is often ‘innocent’ or even contributing to social good. Why then presenting these extreme examples and be so provocative? Why not just ‘play the game’ and focus on ‘good’ examples of performance? Well, I have used the previous arguments to make a general point, using extreme cases which inform us about the very meaning of the concept. If we continue to use performance in our research like we have done and still do, we neglect our scientific duty to be critical toward our objects of research *and* we are measuring concepts like performance whose

validity is contested. As long as we are not taking into account that the ways we conceptualize and measure performance has inherent flaws, we will merely contribute to its instrumental use in society and its potential destructive effects on people, animals, planet and so on. And performance' validity is under question as we might measure something which we do not intend to measure.

Second, many OB-scholars may argue that this focus on performance is in itself not too bad, as long as it is not detrimental for employee well-being. Or one could argue that well-being in itself is a valid outcome, and that in the absence of performance obsession, a focus on well-being may prevail. This argument has been made most notably by humanists, who argue for human flourishing at work. However, this trade-off between performance and well-being is part of the very problem, as it does not address the inherent problem of performance (e.g., lack of intrinsic meaning in performance), and it positions and thereby legitimizes well-being as the ultimate priority of OB. Yet, at the same time, we fail to see the inherent problems of a focus on (employee) well-being. We, therefore need to dive into the structural problems of well-being as an alternative to performance.

### *Some Problems with Well-Being*

There are more or less two ways to conceptualize well-being at work, according to OB-scholars. First, there are indirect ways of assessing well-being, whereby employee well-being is rather implied than directly measured. Primary examples are job satisfaction, commitment and engagement, all of which presume well-being of an individual. While these may be correlated positively with well-being, it is far from self-evident that these indicate well-being. In contrast, it is notable how research often legitimizes satisfaction, commitment, and engagement as they are (or should be) positively related to performance, and thus instrumental to the performance-dominance discussed above. Even more so, they are explained as good for people because they are good for people. Engagement is important for people, because it means people are vigorous and have a lot of energy. Why would that be good for people? Because then they will be able to perform. And because people can perform highly, they are engaged, and thus their well-being is high as well (Bakker, 2011). Such circular argumentation does not 'solve' anything, but is exemplary of the role of 'indirect' measures of well-being: they bridge the gap between well-being and performance, thereby allowing a cheap argumentation that the two can be aligned. So well-being will always matter for organizations when it affects performance. We, as OB-scholars, pretend to care about well-being, but actually we care about human resources becoming dysfunctional when they lack well-being and thus can no longer



contribute to production. For this reason, it is political to consider well-being as a major focus of research, as it is exactly how we instrumentalize people.

Finally, at a deeper level, it is far from evident that satisfaction, commitment, and engagement have real benefits for individuals; committed employees may be less likely to leave because of felt obligation to their organizations, but at the same time this allows for exploitation on the organization's behalf. Health care is a good example where the sector is able to survive due to employees' professional commitment to serve patients *despite* organizations and governments treating them in the most undignified ways (e.g., being underpaid, long working hours, being in precarious jobs). It is because they feel a *duty of care* to patients that the sector (barely) survives, but this is taken into account by organizations who willingly exploit their staff, burning them out in the long run, and thereby taking advantage of the commitment of staff.

Second, direct ways of assessing well-being include objective well-being such as health and physical complaints, and subjective well-being, such as depression and mental health. As complete fields of research have been devoted to this topic, and entire journals have been filled with research on this (Work & Stress, Journal of Occupational Health Psychology etc.), it seems as if the field as such has legitimized its own existence. However, we also have a continued need to understand the meaning of well-being, and particularly in contemporary society. Why is well-being so important actually?

Well-being has been important throughout history, and still is important in many different ways (e.g., well-being for the child working in a tin mine has a fundamental different meaning than for a Western white collar worker). Well-being is also an important outcome of power struggles and structural exploitation. When people suffer from power abuse and structural exploitation, their well-being suffers as well, and, hence, it would be important to study well-being. However, this reveals the problem of our field: we just do not study these important phenomena, as we ignore the more problematic and contested aspects in the workplace, such as power and exploitation. In contrast, well-being has been nicely fitted in the capitalist neoliberal performance paradigm as briefly discussed above and elsewhere (Bal, 2017; Bal & Dóci, 2018). The hedonic perspective on well-being co-aligns with our current dominant perspective on society, where well-being is praised as inherently good in itself, the ultimate goal of life, and at the same time, this never unrealizable fantasy that can motivate us perpetually to do more and more. We cannot just sit on the couch in the evening with a fag and a beer after a hard day of work, but we have to exercise, be fit, and get ourselves in shape. We

tell ourselves that *more* well-being means *more* quality of life. So we need to feel better, be stronger, fitter, healthier, and only then, we will truly be happy. We compare ourselves to others who are obese or burnt out to make us feel better, and we look at fitness models to realize there is a long way to go. There is no ceiling effect in our minds; well-being is just a linear function where we have to climb the well-being ladder: up and up, higher and higher. What we see here is the first limitation of well-being: it remains a challenge for each individual in a linear fashion, but we do not think about the state of high well-being and its (philosophical) implications. It is no wonder psychology has always favored the negative aspects of well-being and the conceptual limitations of positive psychology are ample. The state of negative well-being is quite clear: people feel miserable and something needs to happen. But what happens when we have reached a state of high well-being? What does it bring us? How do we maintain it? Has anyone ever truly reached a state of well-being without any downsides? Does high well-being mean more quality of life? The absence of readily available answers in our work denotes that we do not really think about these issues, as they might indicate that well-being in itself is a flawed objective, despite current literature and wisdom in OB. In other words, our work follows philosopher HP Geerdes' well-known axiom 'the chase is better than the catch', by investigating what could increase well-being, without thinking about what high well-being would bring us. It is treated as an end-state, but we fail to acknowledge that well-being is not an end in itself.

Contemporary dominant humanistic logic fits in with this rationale by proclaiming *flourishing* as the ultimate goal of life. As we flourish in life, and preferably at work, we become real human beings. Thereby, we feel no hesitation (in the West) to put the human being central to everything, to work, life on the planet, and we even call our era after ourselves: the Anthropocene. We are so full of ourselves that the planet turns around us, around our selfies, and at work, we are just the same. Our economy is completely human-centered, and we have become so arrogant that we never ever have to talk about the planet, the environment, and animals in OB because we human beings are central. Flourishing is by definition unequal and only accessible for the privileged, as the large majority in the world will not be able to flourish at work. Hence, when we spend our research time investigating how people can flourish at work, we spend our time and energy on a privileged elite at the expense of the large majority of people who do not have opportunities to flourish. Moreover, as long as the privileged elites flourish, nothing will change, as they will not have a reason to make any changes to the system.

And there are also more general problems with prioritizing well-being in our work. As long as employee well-being is optimal, we can safely suggest we have succeeded as OB-

scholars. Hence, it is no problem to prioritize people over the planet, and that is the explanation for why we do not see fundamental problems in working with oil companies in our research: they show how important it is to treat employees well, and protect their well-being, and as OB-scholars we learn the lessons. That they at the same time destroy our natural resources and the planet, is something not of our concern, because the wealth they have accumulated by exploiting our natural resources enables them to build up well-functioning HR-systems which are examples for us, our work and our teaching.

But even when well-being could be achieved without externalities, it still has its inherent flaws. Most fundamentally, it neglects human life as it is. Life on earth implicates suffering, and while in the Western world we have overcome many obstacles such as poverty and unemployment (but are now degenerating as society with poverty and homelessness on the rise again), one cannot escape that suffering is a central aspect of human life. Every day since humans have existed on the planet, wars have been fought, disease has wiped out whole people, and injury, rape, sickness, death, and emotional suffering are part of our everyday experiences. It is a fallacy to assume that by focusing on enhancing well-being (at work), we can actually take away suffering in life and at work. Suffering has always existed and will always exist. A narrow focus on well-being is too limited to understand what it is to be a human at work. Instead of understanding the importance of suffering we try to escape this difficult question by asking ourselves: *how can people flourish at work?* Thereby it is not a problem to ignore the fact that flourishing is never possible, but also undesirable.

As we obsess with well-being, we ascertain that a lack of well-being indicates a ‘problem’: when people do not experience optimal well-being, there is something that needs to be ‘fixed’. Notwithstanding the potential impossibility of fixing this and having people return to a higher state of well-being, high well-being in itself does not necessarily indicate a solution. We know that well-being at the least is affected by cognitive dissonance, as we could ‘tell’ ourselves that we should be feeling well. When we have career success, a partner, children, a nice house, we may experience well-being, and tell ourselves we are happy. At the same time, we know that well-being and happiness do not result from material things.

Moreover, we neglect the importance of lack of well-being. On the one hand, well-being may be beyond an individual’s control (which is the case with many illnesses). To indicate lack of well-being as a ‘problem that needs to be fixed’ overestimates the possibility to enhance well-being, especially amongst those whose well-being is beyond their control. A narrow focus on hedonic well-being is merely inappropriate here, especially when our research is conducted cross-sectionally where we compare well-being of people and link it to predictors

to explain why some people experience more well-being than others. But more fundamentally, a lack of well-being is enormously important in the wider social context. Depression, anxiety, anger and so on are not merely indicative of a DSM-classification, but a necessary state of affairs in contemporary society, just as burnout is in the contemporary workplace. Hence, the question is not how to ‘solve’ anxiety, anger, depression and burnout, and how to fix people who experience burnout and as a result are unable to work, but the right question should be: *what does the burnout epidemic tell us about the contemporary workplace?* Lack of well-being is important, not just to understand that well-being is not an individually experienced phenomenon, but as a necessary step towards societal change. In other words, I argue that depression is informative for us, not just to indicate that we have to protect our own well-being, but to understand the severity of our predicament. In the context of climate change, ever-increasing income inequality, populism, neoliberalism, and individualism (Bal, 2017, C1), it could even be argued that we have a *duty* to depression, in order to understand the severity of where we are currently in society. Despite the enormous pressure for ‘normalization’ in our fields (OB, HRM, management) to pretend we can just safely continue our lifestyles and the ways we have been living and working during the last 25 years or so, we *need* to be depressed to be able to collectively organize and elicit societal change. This also addresses the fundamental Western perspective on well-being: we can tick all the boxes that should contribute to well-being (a career, an attractive partner, highly intelligent children, a house, hobbies, nice friends, loving family), but one still feels so lonely and empty inside, and unable to truly enjoy life. This is not merely the emptiness of consumer society, as it has traditionally been explained, but it is also what has been called ‘disavowal’: we know that our ways of living give us material richness at the expense of destruction of the planet and exploitation of people worldwide, but we *nonetheless* are still doing it. We increasingly know that our ways of living and working are unsustainable and destroying the planet, but we persist in it because we do not see how we can get out of this mess (of climate change, inequality, etc.). Hence, feelings of depression serve an important purpose, as they direct towards the feelings of guilt inherent to contemporary working. While depression obviously may have various deleterious effects, and may ultimately lead to suicide, it cannot be underestimated and treated as if a merely individualized phenomenon that should be individually treated (with medicine or therapy). It informs us of the truths that many of us are unwilling to openly see and acknowledge, and that is that well-being is a much more complex phenomenon than how we currently treat it. Thus, lack of well-being is also important and we need to understand and value this in our thinking,

our work, and our theories. Additionally, we might be better off by postulating some (more radical) alternatives to our obsession with performance and well-being.

### *Some Alternatives to Performance and Well-Being*

Organizations cannot exist without performance and well-being. People need to be able to perform for an organization to exist, and people need well-being in order to do their jobs. However, organizations can also not exist in the long run when we have used up the planet and stripped it off their resources. Organizations have no right to exist if they exploit resources, the environment, people, and animals. Yet, they do, and OB-scholars ignore those tensions in their focus on performance and employee well-being. So, is there a way out?

We need to find a way out of the deadlock between performance and well-being by introducing new ways of thinking about the outcomes of our research. Hence, I will outline some outcomes which we may take into account when designing and conducting our research. They may serve to be useful complements to our focus on performance and well-being. It is important to state that ‘outcomes’ is a positivistic term, and fits the positivistic nature of OB quite well. However, we need to debate the *focus* of our research, or that what we want to contribute to in relation to our community and the workplace itself. Hence, henceforth when I speak of outcomes, I refer not just to outcome in a strict positivistic meaning, but pertaining to the very focus of what we want to achieve with our research.

First, work has a much broader meaning to people than merely to produce and serve corporate interests, whilst trying to retain one’s well-being. I mentioned earlier the work of Sennett on craftswomanship, which is about conducting work *with* intrinsic meaning, and thus work where doing the work is a valid outcome in itself, as it has meaning for the person or for others. However, this also needs to be separated from what David Graeber (2018) coined as ‘bullshit jobs’, which are not only jobs that are obviously useless, but also those jobs in which the individual carrying it out may perceive value, but from a broader perspective the value, or dignity, may be less obvious (I discussed this in Chapter 5 of my book on workplace dignity). We therefore need to move beyond trite and hegemonic conceptualizations of meaningful work, towards a revaluing of work as an intrinsic activity, and valued as such by OB-scholars.

However, work is not just about the individual performing it and perceptions of meaningfulness, as meaning (in life) does not have to be derived from having a job. More importantly, as OB-scholars we need to ask ourselves what is currently needed in our societies and workplaces, and consequently focus on these issues. Let me discuss a few. First, we know that business is largely responsible for the continuous high carbon emissions and destruction

of the planet. We have to ask ourselves, therefore, how we can assess whether behaviors of people in the workplace contribute to restoration and protection of the planet. We need to radically move beyond assessments of ‘pro-environmental behavior’ as done previously in our field (where recycling could be an example of such behavior, while it is widely known that recycling only will not address climate change at all), and investigate how our individual and collective actions may contribute to protection and restoration of the planet. The same argument could be made for social injustice, racism, inequality, neoliberalism, individualism, and others: we have to ask ourselves more radical questions whether we have anything to say in response to the main societal questions imposed upon us, and all of which are relevant in relation to the workplace.

So can we truly value alternative outcomes, and devote our efforts into investigation of how we can contribute to greater social cohesion (in the workplace and beyond), protection of people in- and outside organizations, social belonging, vibrant and inclusive communities, and so on? Currently, it has become quite well-known that in order to address the main societal questions, we need more collaboration, communities, dialogue, and cooperation to be able to connect again with each other, in a world of polarization where we lost our ability to connect in daily life. This is widely acknowledged nowadays, and certainly in more intellectual circles (read for instance Naomi Klein, George Monbiot, Paul Mason); the challenge for OB-scholars is now to connect to these debates, and be inspired and informed about our way of doing our research and setting our goals.

One might ask how to do this. First, we need to stop letting organizations dictate our research agendas. Well-meaning scholars often talk about the research-practice gap and how to bridge this gap. However, this does not mean we simply implement organizational agendas in our own research and focus on narrow organizational goals such as performance and employee well-being. As editors and reviewers, we should reject papers that are merely studying these trite outcomes linking it to whatever predictor. We need to find our own voice and enact upon the agency that we have as a result of the privilege to be working in academia. If we are not able to express our own independent opinion, then who does in society?

A framework that could be informative (at least for my own research) is my work on workplace dignity (Bal, 2017; Bal & De Jong, 2017, 2018). I described the concept of workplace dignity, and how everything that is made part of the workplace has its intrinsic, inviolable worth and meaning, including people, animals, the environment, natural resources, buildings, tools and finance. If we depart from the point that we acknowledge that everything has an intrinsic worth, we can ask ourselves new questions that we have never asked before.

To do so, I differentiated between four stages of workplace dignity: violation prevention, respect, protection, and promotion. At the lowest level, we may investigate how people and organizations may prevent dignity violations to occur. This may sound familiar to scholars in the domain of the psychological contract, as the question is to understand how dignity violations occur, and can be prevented. However, in contrast to the majority of research on psychological contracts, it does not stop here, but new questions arise. More specifically, we could investigate how we can respect people in the workplace in line with their dignity. In extension, we may investigate how we can contribute to organizations which respect the intrinsic worth of the planet and all that exists on the planet. What can people do who work in oil companies to respect the planet? What can people in accountancy firms do to respect the spirit of the (tax) law (and thus not to facilitate shady tax avoidance schemes)?

Yet, this is not sufficient; people and organizations need to think about how they can protect the dignity of people and the planet. We need to investigate how we can create cultures within organizations where questions about the protection of dignity are normalized, and where people can work towards organizations that actively protect the intrinsic worth of people and the planet. And finally, we are not there yet, so we could ask ourselves how people and organizations may promote more dignity in the workplace, and thus contribute to organizations that not only protect what we have, but also actively strive towards greater dignity or repair instances where dignity has been violated. One example might be restoration of dignity, which means that in case of dignity violations, we may work towards restoration of dignity in society and the planet. Examples of this may be the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South-Africa and at a more mundane level the organization Commonland. The TRC aimed to restore the violated dignity of colored people during Apartheid, and thereby promoted dignity among the people and set an example which should still inspire contemporary practice in organizations and society. The organization Commonland strives towards restoration of landscapes across the world which have been degraded as a result of deforestation, overgrazing, overexploitation and so on. In both examples we see dignity being violated over the course of many years, decades, but at the same time, we see people working towards restoration and greater dignity in the world. It is a shame we do not conduct research on such phenomena in greater detail, and allow our theories about human behavior in the workplace to be a force for good, contributing to goals that not merely benefit organizational goals for profitability. It would in any case provide us with research that is much more relevant and interesting and much less boring than a lot of research currently being produced in our (top-tier) journals.

This piece has been written out of frustration and disillusionment with the dominant obsession with performance and well-being in OB. Anyone who is interested in transforming some or more of these ideas in a more academic piece for publication, feel free to contact me via [mbal@lincoln.ac.uk](mailto:mbal@lincoln.ac.uk).

**References** (references are illustrative of my arguments and merely serve to underpin my main points rather than to be an exhaustive list of papers that have made similar arguments previously).

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